

Guns Rights & Responsibilities

I grew up in a small rural town where most of the families hunted for recreation and to put food on the table. My father taught us about guns and gun safety from the time we were five years old and there was a gun rack with a thirty-ought six, a twelve gauge and a twenty-two right above our dinner table. Dad gave us a list of rules that I can still remember: never play with a gun; treat all guns as if they were loaded, etc. Before we got our first BB guns as kids we had to prove we knew the rules and then show with empty guns that we understood how to use them safely.

At that time, hunters where we lived could get two deer licenses and each license was good for two deer. We went along with our father on deer hunting trips before we were 10, and we hunted rabbits and other small game with 22s at a very young age. When I was just 14 years old, I went hunting with my father and shot my first deer - a near trophy mule deer whose rack I still have mounted in my home.

Some of the best memories I have of growing up are from hunting and shooting. I know so well the sound of my father waking us in the early hours, the smell of the woods, the chill in the morning air, learning to walk quietly among the dry leaves. I also know the responsibility of cleaning and skinning an animal we killed, packing it out, taking care of the meat and hide, and the code of ethics that says you eat what you kill.

When we weren't hunting, guns were still part of our life growing up because the whole family enjoyed target shooting. We reloaded our ammunition and weekends were often spent plinking at bottles, shooting trap, or sighting in rifles as the season approached. We got to be pretty fair shots and in scouts I earned marksmanship awards and won shooting competitions.

So guns and hunting are something I grew up with and understand and respect. My other experience with guns comes from working in hospitals and clinics with the victims of gun accidents or violence in their families. I have treated patients with severe bullet wounds to the brain and I have helped the family members of people who were killed with guns try to rebuild their lives and cope with the loss.

Where I Stand

As a hunter and target shooter, I know well the enjoyment that can come with responsible use of firearms; as a health care professional, I know

the harm that can come from irresponsible or illegal use of firearms; and as a member of Congress I am sworn to uphold the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Based on the Second Amendment, I strongly believe law abiding citizens have a fundamental constitutional right to own firearms and the government has a responsibility to protect that right. I also believe that the people who manufacture, sell and use firearms have a responsibility to ensure they are used safely and responsibly. That is why I have emphasized a common sense approach that respects gun rights, but also calls for reasonable gun safety and responsibility.

A Return to Reason

I believe we need a return to reason when it comes to gun rights and responsibilities. When I was growing up, organizations like the National Rifle Association were dedicated to hunter safety and education and marksmanship training. In those days we respected guns and we used them to feed our families and for recreation. We did not worship guns, we did not base our entire political judgments on gun issues at the expense of jobs, education, health, the economy etc., and we did not see a need or reason, apart from collecting, to own fully automatic weapons, "street sweeper" shotguns, or other such firearms.

Most people accepted that if you wanted to own a firearm you should have training, but then the training was provided by a parent, a school program, scouts, or some other organized group. No one I knew who hunted would want to be in the woods or at a shooting range with someone who was not properly trained in safety, and most serious hunters and gun owners at the time rejected and stayed clear of the "macho" or "cowboy" types who waved their guns around or made threatening comments. The true cowboys in our town, the guys who worked on cattle ranches and in the mountains, respected guns as tools of their work, but they would have been the last to be boastful or threatening with them.

Things have changed in the last couple of decades and by and large they have changed for the worse. While I think most responsible hunters and gun owners still hold the values and attitudes that existed when I was young, we also see bumper stickers with pictures of pistols pointed at the driver behind, we read of drivers killing each other over perceived slights on a roadway, and we hear overheated rhetoric about the government wanting to "take away all your guns" so they can install some kind of totalitarian state.

While I strongly defend the rights of our citizens to own firearms and will defend that right in Congress, I believe that this new attitude of anger and fear toward fellow citizens and toward the government is unnecessary and harmful to our country. It may make for effective fundraising and political rhetoric for interest groups, but it contributes to a society of fear and violence that is much different than the community I was raised in and most people want their children

to live in.

While protecting the right to keep and bear arms, I believe the interest of public safety demands that we must keep guns out of the hands of criminals and we must take reasonable and responsible measures to ensure that unsupervised children do not have access to firearms. I also believe that certain firearms, such as fully automatic weapons intended for military use, should not be available to the general public except under very specific conditions and qualifications. This is not unreasonable and it is a far cry from a despotic government wanting to take away the rights of its citizens.

I would encourage people on both extremes of this issue to consider a different perspective. Those who live in fear of all guns need to understand that when guns are used and gun safety education is provided as it was when I was a youth and still is in many parts of this country today, guns are not necessarily any more dangerous than an automobile, a gallon of gasoline, or countless other items that can harm people if used improperly or for malicious purposes. At the same time, those who put threatening stickers on their trucks, who say the only issue they care about in politics is "gun rights," and who make extreme claims about our government being a totalitarian state, have lost sight of a whole host of other priorities and have wildly exaggerated the "threat" posed by gun safety legislation.

I recognize that my position on this issue may not please people on either extreme of this issue, but it is based on reason, experience, common sense, and a recognition that rights, including Constitutional protected rights, come with responsibilities.

Ensuring Airport Safety

Congressman Baird believes we must ensure the safety of air travel. He supported legislation to prohibit the manufacture, import, sale, delivery, possession, or receipt of any firearm that is not detectable by walk-through metal detectors or airport x-ray machines. This legislation also bans those firearms that, when subject to x-ray machines commonly used at airports, do not generate an image that accurately depicts the shape of the component.

Congressman Baird also understands that no security measures can ever be completely foolproof. He supports federal initiatives that allow qualified and specially trained commercial airline pilots to carry firearms in-flight in order to deter and prevent acts of terror. As a member of the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, Congressman Baird worked to pass a bill creating a federal program to train and certify commercial pilots so that they can carry loaded firearms aboard their aircraft. Since its passage in 2002, this bill

has helped train hundreds of carefully screened commercial pilots to use firearms aboard an aircraft. Not only does this sensible program provide an extra layer of security for airline passengers, but it also serves as a deterrent to terrorists and criminals.

Providing Body Armor for Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officers risk their lives every day to protect our safety. Unfortunately, many officers, particularly those in smaller, rural areas, are sent into harms way without sufficient bulletproof vests. Congressman Baird was a cosponsor of legislation, the Bulletproof Vest Partnership Grant Act, that created a federal matching grant program to help local and state police agencies purchase body armor. Hundreds of bulletproof vests have been obtained for local police and sheriffs through this important grant program.

Opposing D.C. Gun Ban

Congressman Baird signed an amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court, urging the Supreme Court to uphold a ruling that D.C.'s gun ban violates the Second Amendment. In 2007, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit ruled that Second Amendment rights are individual rights and that it is unconstitutional to ban them. D.C. appealed the court's ruling to the Supreme Court.

Protecting Law Abiding Businesses and Sportsmen while Holding Criminals Accountable

Congressman Baird understands that the vast majority of gun owners, manufacturers, and sellers are law-abiding and responsible. He also believes that those who sell or use weapons illegally or irresponsibly must bear full accountability and be punished for their actions. Congressman Baird supported the Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, which was signed into law in October of 2005. This bill prohibits civil lawsuits against firearms manufacturers and venders for the unlawful or dangerous actions of their customers, except in cases where the seller or vender acted illegally or negligently. This bill, which was supported by sportsmen across the nation, will help ensure that legitimate, law-abiding firearms and venders do not become the target of baseless lawsuits. It will, however, protect the public's right to sue gun dealers and manufacturers who act illegally or endanger public safety by manufacturing defective weapons.

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